

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Writing and Society
Research Centre

Literary Journals in Australia

July 2023

FINAL REPORT

Catriona Menzies-Pike and Samuel Ryan

Research supported by the Australia Council for the Arts



Literary Journals in Australia

Contents

1) Introduction	2
2) Key Findings and Recommendations	6
3) Cultural Value	7
4) Audiences	13
5) The Transition to Digital	17
6) Labour	24
7) Funding	28
8) Recommendations	33

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Australia Council for the Arts and undertaken through the Writing and Society Research Centre of Western Sydney University.

We acknowledge and respect Traditional Owners of the Lands, the Darug, Gundungurra, D'harawal, Wiradjuri and Bundjalung Peoples, upon which our campuses now stand. We continue to value the generations of knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples embed within our University.

Attribution: Menzies-Pike, Catriona and Ryan, Samuel, Literary Journals in Australia (2023). Report prepared for the Australia Council of the Arts.

1) INTRODUCTION

Literary journals, magazines, small publishers and independent literary organisations are the powerhouses of Australian literature. They offer platforms for writers and arts workers alike to develop their skills, to encounter peers and audiences, and to build their careers. And in turn, small publishers and publications are a place where audiences in Australia and around the world encounter new ideas, new writers, new forms of practice. Australian literature would be less diverse and less interesting without them.

With the support of the Australia Council, we set out to understand what it is that makes Australian literary journals and small publishing operations tick – and to investigate how they might operate in the coming decades. We sought to reach beyond crisis narratives about our sector to discover how literary journals function as organisations. We spoke with the editors and directors of 22 Australian literary journals and surveyed a total of 29 organisations in late 2022 and early 2023, taking as our focus three main areas of inquiry: digital practice, audience engagement, and remuneration for artists and artswriters. Not surprisingly, our respondents had a great deal to say about the forms of cultural value delivered by literary journals – and about the real challenges they faced in maintaining skills, connecting with audiences and, most of all, paying artists and artswriters at a fair rate.

With the launch of Writers Australia eagerly anticipated in the sector, there are abundant opportunities for investment in this vital area of cultural activity, in line with the policy priorities identified in Revive, the federal government's new cultural policy. At present, literary journals are not well-equipped to meet the strategic objectives at the heart of this policy. Organisations lack the resources to centre First Nations writers and artswriters primarily because they are not able to secure funding to employ staff with appropriate cultural knowledge and experience. Organisations aspire to reflect the breadth of Australian stories but again are hindered from doing so by their limited ability to recruit and pay their staff. Artists are centred in literary organisations – but often at the cost of artswriters. We see literary journals as part of the cultural infrastructure that supports the Australian literary sector – but this infrastructure is held together by organisations working under highly precarious conditions. And finally, there's tremendous scope for literary journals to engage new audiences in Australia and internationally, especially via digital platforms; what's missing is support for skills development and clear guidelines for measuring and reporting impact.

Literary journals in Australia in 2023

We're grateful to the editors and managers of the following organisations for their contribution to this project:

Australian Book Review: Peter Rose

Australian Poetry: Jacinta LePlastrier

Baby Teeth: Lore White

Cordite: Kent MacCarter

Debris: Julia Flaster

Going Down Swinging: Georgia Coldebella and Hollen Singleton

Griffith Review: John Tague

HEAT: Alexandra Christie

Island: Vern Field

Kill Your Darlings: Rebecca Starford

LIMINAL: Leah Jing McIntosh

Mascara Literary Review: Michelle Cahill, Andrea Yang and Monique Nair

Meanjin: Esther Anatolitis

Overland: Evelyn Araluen, Stephanie Holt

Portside Review: Logan Griffiths

Rabbit: Jessica Wilkinson

Saltbush Review: Gemma Parker

Sydney Review of Books: Catriona Menzies-Pike

Suburban Review: Claire Albrecht

Unfurl: Stephen J. Williams

Unusual Work: Pi O

Westerly: Catherine Noske

Twenty-nine organisations also completed a survey that helped us build a detailed map of the sector and guided our interviews: *Sydney Review of Books*, *Westerly*, *Baby Teeth*, *Cordite*, *Griffith Review*, *Debris*, *Rabbit*, Red Room Poetry, *Hecate*, Writing NSW, Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Centre for Stories, *Island*, *Liminal*, *StylusLit*, *Suburban Review*, *Overland*, *HEAT*, *Unusual Work*, *Australian Book Review*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Meanjin*, *Australian Poetry*, *Saltbush Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Science Write Now*, *ASAL*, Southerly. We note that the lead researcher on this project, Catriona Menzies-Pike, was also a research participant in her capacity as editor of the *Sydney Review of Books* and contributed survey and interview responses. In view of the small size of the Australian literary journal sector and its interconnectedness, this proximity to the research field is not inappropriate. Indeed, as discussed below, one of the key findings to emerge from this research is the diversity of the field and its resistance to binding generalisations.

These lists indicate the range of organisations that fall into the category of literary journal. As we have sought to find out about the shared or common experiences that bring literary journals together, we've also been prompted to reflect upon the great difference between Australian literary journals. Our case studies range from publications that have been in print since the 1940s, several journals that started off in print and have adapted completely to digital spaces, and small journals that have only ever published online. Some organisations

rely on forms of government funding to pay most of their costs, others operate more like commercial entities.

We draw extensively from our interviews in the report that follows. Journal editors are eloquent advocates for and explicators of their work – and it is important to maintain the distinction between journals rather than iron out differences. In response to our initial survey, many organisations commented that they struggled to answer the questions. They see their organisations as unique in their circumstances, and as a result uniquely unfit to meet funding criteria. Although current state and federal arts funding arrangements do support a wide range of organisations, it's notable that many organisations see themselves as more unlike their peers than like them.

Small literary organisations are sometimes thought of as evanescent but more than half of our survey respondents had been in operation for more than ten years. Only three respondents had been in operation for less than three years. The number of journals in operation in 2023 suggests the sector is thriving. By contrast, a 1994 Australia Council-funded review of magazines funded by the Literature Board reviewed only eleven magazines.

Australian literary journals are clustered on the eastern seaboard of Australia. Most of the organisations who responded to our survey were based in either NSW or Victoria. Four out of 29 were based in Queensland. We received a response from three organisations in Western Australia and only one organisation based in South Australia, the ACT and Tasmania respectively and no responses from organisations in the Northern Territory. With some important exceptions, most of the case studies do not see themselves defined by the states in which they operate. Writing by Australian writers anchors most of their programs, but several see themselves as working in an international context.

Small and micro-organisations

Literary organisations are all small arts organisations with relatively small budgets and low organisational headcounts. Half of the organisations we surveyed employ between three and six staff. A further six reported employing between six and ten staff members, and only two employed more than ten staff. We note that headcount here does not equal full-time equivalent employment and that being named a staff member at a literary journal does not necessarily signify being paid an award wage. More often than not, staff are paid on a stipend basis rather than at rates tied to hours or days of work.

Journals may all be small organisations in the broader picture of the Australian arts — but differences in scale are perceived to be highly meaningful within the sector. A theme that emerged repeatedly in our interviews with editors was the difference between university-affiliated journals and micro-organisations.

Many Australian literary journals have long associations with universities, which may provide office space, fund salaries, or offer other forms of in-kind support. University support is crucial to the viability of these journals and has a significant effect on their day to day operations, setting expectations in particular about award rates of pay for staff. Within the sector, journals with institutional support are viewed as a separate category and perceived to be advantaged in a very competitive funding environment.

As well as university-affiliated journals, our case studies include many journals that are best understood as micro-organisations. Such organisations operate on very small budgets and their activities are largely contingent on unpredictable funding outcomes. Most organisations that we spoke to do pay their staff, but in micro-organisations rates of pay are extremely low and not indexed to award wages. There's an urgent need for guidance for organisations about fair rates of pay and an important role for Writers Australia to play here in setting standards.

What is a literary journal?

Until perhaps recently, a literary journal was an easy object to identify. It was regularly published, in print, sent to subscribers and sold at bookstores. A contemporary definition of the literary journal must incorporate print and digital publications – and recognise the range of activities undertaken by literary journals. The literary journals we explored publish new work – but they also present public events, workshops, mentorship programs and book-length publications. They do this to build communities around their journals, to connect with their audiences, and to provide opportunities for writers. Indeed, many organisations we spoke to weren't sure whether literary journal was the right description for the work that they do. Several of the organisations who completed our survey are better known as service organisations, but also undertake publishing activity that brings them in line with literary journals. Being a periodical implies a regular publishing schedule. With only one exception, our survey respondents all published on a regular frequency, anywhere from weekly to annually.

With only one exception, all our respondents had a website, with eleven organisations publishing new work online only. A majority of organisations publish both in print and online. Some of our case studies, such as *Liminal* and the *Sydney Review of Books* have only ever existed online. Only three of our case studies don't publish new work online: *Suburban Review*, *Debris* and *Unusual Work*. Almost all organisations use social media and publish at least some of their program online, whether on a website or by pdf distribution.

Most organisations had updated their website in the last two years; only two organisations reported having a website that was more than five years old. That said, a theme that was struck with great vigour and frequency in our interviews was the misalignment of organisations' digital infrastructure and capacity to their ambitions for audience growth.

Rapid development of digital publishing technologies have made it possible for small Australian literary organisations to reach international audiences in a manner that would have been unimaginable twenty years ago. And as the technology develops, we expect that some of our assumptions about what qualifies as a literary journal will themselves become obsolete. We have designated platforms such as Patreon and Substack as out of the scope of this study firstly because their modes of distribution tend to be organised around a single writer-editor, which means as organisations, they do not resemble small literary organisations. These are emerging platforms, however, and future researchers may make different classifications.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Literary journals in Australia are tremendously resilient organisations. They publish an enormous volume of new work by Australian writers from all backgrounds, at every stage of their careers. Australian literature would be diminished without the commitment to diversity, experimentalism, contemporaneity, and community building embodied by literary journals as a group. But just as Australian literature has suffered from decades of under-funding, so too have literary journals, and the cost is largely borne by an underpaid workforce.

- Literary journals publish new work — but their range of activity extends far wider. Investment and policy needs to recognise this range of activity — and journals need to do more to tell the story of their broader cultural value.
- All literary journals are small arts organisations — but some of them are very small. The organisations that publish literary journals differ enormously in scale and organisational models. A one-size fits all approach to funding and policy doesn't reflect this diversity nor does it meet the needs of the sector.
- Project-based funding is an inefficient way to support literary organisations. Not only is the capacity of organisations to plan ahead inhibited by the uncertainty of project-based funding, project funding does not tend to support operational and staff costs and so adds to the unpaid administrative loads of staff.
- Emerging and micro-organisations are not able to access operational funding, whether through eligibility criteria or an inability to compete with larger organisations, particularly those attached to universities.
- Underpaid labour fuels Australian literary journals. Although most staff who work for Australian literary journals in an editorial, administrative or production capacity are paid, most of them are underpaid. There is an urgent need to set new standards for pay to guide investment in operational funding for small and micro-organisations.
- Precarious work conditions and low rates of pay for editorial and production staff undermines the sustainability of journals and leads to burnout and staff turnover.
- 20 per cent of surveyed organisations employ at least one First Nations staff member and 68 per cent employ at least one staff member from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background (including people who identify as migrants, refugees, non-English speaking background or people of colour).
- Most organisations wish to employ more First Nations staff and staff from culturally diverse backgrounds as a percentage of their workforce and in total. The principal obstacle to doing so is accessing funding for staff. This in turn restricts the ability of organisations to provide culturally appropriate editorial guidance and other forms of support to writers from diverse backgrounds.
- The reach and impact of literary journals is not well understood, especially when it comes to digital audiences. Journals need support and guidance to be able to measure and report their audience engagement.
- A lack of funding options for the development of digital infrastructure and skills is hindering the ability of literary journals to build their audiences and to extend their reach to audiences within Australia and beyond.
- Digital tools help literary journals to publish work, to reach and build their audiences, to manage subscriptions and submissions, and to connect staff and contributors. A lack of skills, funding and time prevents organisations from tapping the potential of digital publishing, audience development and other forms of marketing.

2) CULTURAL VALUE

What do literary journals do?

For many of us working in the literary sector, the significance of literary journals is self-evident. And yet as we have found in our research, there are a range of views about where the cultural value of literary journals actually lies. Although everyone we spoke to advocated for the value of publishing new work and providing opportunities for writers, the points of emphasis varied, as the comments gathered below show. Talking to editors about the value of literary journals reveals tremendous energy, diversity – and optimism. As a group of organisations, there is more to be done in telling the story of our work, in advocating for its significance.

Literary journals publish new writing. This too seems self-evident – but only two organisations who responded to our survey told us that was their only activity. Most organisations present events and workshops. Many offer mentorship to writers and artists. Book publishing and podcast production also falls within the remit of Australian literary journals. Most organisations do not focus on one particular literary form or genre, publishing works of poetry, fiction and non-fiction alongside each other. Of the six journals with a specialised focus, four concentrated their attention on poetry.

All of which is to say that while publishing new work remains the first imperative for literary journals, most engage in a range of activities, some of which serve literary culture more broadly, others of which provide opportunities specifically for writers. They do so in order to build communities of writers and readers, to amplify the work of the journal and its contributors, and to take advantage of funding opportunities.

Publishing new work

At the heart of all the organisations we spoke to is the commissioning, development and publication of new work. Literary journals publish essays, reviews, poetry, short fiction, memoir and cross-media works. Often literary journals publish work that is unlikely to appear elsewhere, especially in book form: first publications by emerging writers, experimental writing, writing that would otherwise be uncommercial. This means readers often encounter new work that they wouldn't otherwise read.

When you buy a literary magazine, or subscribe to a literary magazine, you're having a curated experience, and you're seeing work that you wouldn't otherwise necessarily have chosen yourself. – Vern Field, *Island*.

Literary journals are places for writers to experiment with form, with different styles of writing. They're also a platform for introducing new voices and for continuing the careers of writers who are in between books or at a middling point in their career, I think also, they're about celebrating the short form generally. Short stories are not really published anywhere else other than in literary journals, in particular, and also literary essays. – Alexandra Christie, *HEAT*.

Although the aesthetic and political interests of journals vary, there's general agreement that literary journals foster innovation and encourage experimentalism. Many of our interviewees

drew a distinction between the work presented by journals and the books published by small and large Australian publishers.

Literary journals too offer what Esther Anatolitis calls a 'cultural snapshot' of the time and place in which they're published:

You'll be reading an essay, and then a poem and a short story, a review, something that is giving you this wonderful encapsulation of Australian culture, from the point of view of this particular literary journal. From the reader's point of view, this is just an incredibly special experience. And then the value, of course, for writers is being able to have your work reach an audience alongside others who are working in parallel, to have well-established alongside emerging writers, to have those pieces be in a dialogue with each other, which just would not otherwise occur. – Esther Anatolitis, *Meanjin*.

This contemporaneity was raised by many of our interviewees, who pointed to the capacity of journals to publish new work relatively quickly, to stay in dialogue with the moment. Literary journals aren't necessarily required to be timely with their programs, but they can be responsive to the contemporary moment in ways that other forms of publishing cannot.

These are spaces where writers are able to engage with what's happening with writing and in the general sphere contemporaneously. – Hollen Singleton, *Going Down Swinging*.

Literary journals offer insights into Australian literature – and Australian culture – that are quite different to those offered by the publishing industry. This is in part because most journals operate free of the commercial imperatives that drive publishing. At their best, they capture the range and diversity of contemporary Australian writing, and offer hopeful pathways to its future.

I see literary journals as a mechanism for building communities, drawing communities together through literature. Also there's another more positive, hopeful, understanding of them as a space and what they can offer is like a range, again, thinking about that word diversity, like a range of demographics. And not just along cultural, racial lines, different age groups, different voices coming from different places on the age and generation spectrum. – Jessica Wilkinson, *Rabbit*.

Opportunities for writers

Many Australian writers get their first break in literary journals. Literary journals offer the thrill of publication, exposure to audiences, income and professional development opportunities to writers. As well as providing a platform for writers to be published early in their careers, literary journals are spaces where writers can trial new ideas, approaches and methodologies in the short form. Communities of writers build around journals, providing support and networks for writers.

If you look really at the development of any writer's career, you would be able to point to those early publications through journals, newspapers, smaller-scale media. These give writers the benefit, yes, of an audience, but also to have that crucial editorial process that you learn so much from. You can ostensibly learn how to write through a

creative writing degree but that is always going to be quite limited by the specific research and teaching outcomes of an institution. – Evelyn Araluen, *Overland*.

Although literary journals provide publication opportunities that are not available in the publishing industry, it is not uncommon for publication in journals ultimately to lead to book-length publication.

Literary journals are one of the only places where writers can test out short works, or publish short works. They are also one of the only places where people can kind of incubate new ideas, a new idea that might later become a book-length work. – Vern Field, *Island*.

The structural impediments to accessing the publishing industry for emerging writers and writers from minoritised backgrounds were raised by many interviewees. Literary journals provide pathways to publication for writers who lack the portfolio or resources to access the publishing industry, and they give writers whose practice might not appear to fit the criteria of the publishing industry a foothold to build an audience and develop their work.

The purpose of literary journals? They provide a generative space for emerging and established writers; these spaces allow writers to try out new work, in a way just outside of the book publishing industry. There is so much room for experimentation. In terms of *Liminal*, it was important for us to make a literary space outside of what is predominantly a very white publishing industry, and for writers, once published, to potentially have a chance to get more opportunities within a wider literary ecosystem. – Leah Jing McIntosh, *Liminal*.

Literary journals are able to platform work outside of the book publishing industry, which is a different space that can be harder for writers to get into. Literary journals don't require writers to have a full body of work. A lot of emerging writers, new writers aren't at that place yet. But we still want to be able to have their work distributed, read, enjoyed, have them get feedback, build an audience. So literary journals are, I think, an important and necessary step for getting work out there and allowing writers to build a sense of not only confidence in publishing work, but an understanding of the process of how that occurs, how to work with an editor. – Claire Albrecht, *Suburban Review*.

For many writers, literary journals not only provide their first experience of publication but also their first experience of being edited. Editors of literary journals are able to work closely with writers – whether emerging writers, established writers ploughing new ground, or writers yearning for close collaboration – to develop new work and to support writers as they build their practice.

Literary journals really are the breeding grounds and the petri dish of new talent. It is the on-the-road, everyday machinery our artists turn to first in their career for feedback review and hopefully publication. There probably wouldn't be very few first time novels published in Australia where the authors have never published anything in journals. I'm not saying that doesn't happen but it would be pretty rare. Literary journals provide that place for careers to develop – Kent MacCarter, *Cordite Poetry Review*.

New spaces

The literary sector has not historically been easy for marginalised writers to access; First Nations writers, diasporic writers, queer and disabled writers have been excluded from

participating in the journal sector, as editors and as contributors. Class continues to cut across these categories and the very low rates of pay for writers and artswriters are perceived to have maintained middle-class domination of the sector. Many organisations prioritise the creation of new and accessible spaces within the literary sector that allow for new forms of practice, evaluation and editorial work to flourish. In this way literary journals can undertake counter-hegemonic work and contribute to a broader project of social change.

I see *Liminal's* 'cultural contribution' as creating an important space for anti-colonial and anti-racist work within the literary industry. But it's more than that; *Liminal* is a literary publication that encourages and asks for joy, for rigour, for work that pushes the boundaries of what is expected of diasporic artists in this country. Notably, *Liminal* is the only literary publication in so-called Australia that is edited by people of colour, the only one which commissions work only by talented writers and artists of colour. – Leah Jing McIntosh, *Liminal*.

Smaller organisations have this ability to share, share and showcase works that aren't seen in the mainstream. Even in the literary world, the voices that are heard are mainstream voices, the voices of privileged groups. In journals, and smaller publications, I think there's a lot more space for oppressed voices to be seen and heard. – Lore White, *Baby Teeth*.

Literary journals are essential cultural artefacts that educate and explain ideas and concepts from all points of view. These are places where people come to escape, but also learn and educate themselves and educate others, which is my top priority. – Logan Griffiths, *Portside Review*.

Building communities

Publishing might be the core activity for literary journals, but many see their organisations as having a role to play in building communities of writers and readers. Events build cultural communities and connect writers to each other. Post-pandemic, many organisations emphasised the value of events in re-connecting writers after long periods of isolation.

We only publish online which means that events really give a concrete sense of the work in the world. People come along to the event, maybe to just see one writer, but they're exposed to several more. And then there's just all the lovely conversations you have with people at those events, who are excited to know about the journal and excited to support the journal. Again, during the pandemic, that has been really valuable to us, having that presence. And having those events here in South Australia has been really valuable – Gemma Parker, *Saltbush Review*.

It was great to foster this little writing group. I think a few people that met there are still friends, and in touch now. These extra curricular, non-publishing in-person activities cement the community around the journal. Because, you can visit a website everyday, but it's not going to enrich your life in a lot of aspects. So we have these other little activities that help people connect with each other and connect with writing and creating art in different ways. – Lore White, *Baby Teeth*.

It's not only writers and audiences who benefit from such events. Literary journals provide vital career development for literary artswriters.

We deliver an annual workshop which began as the emerging editors workshop. And it's less tailored to writers than it is to people who are wanting to get into the publishing industry, particularly for literary journals, people who want to start their own journal. So we renamed it last year, Jumpstart a Journal. And we found that really rewarding in the sense that we're bringing people in to see how journals work, to show them what's involved and how rewarding it can be and teaching them some of the skills that could allow them to do that themselves. We are meeting people who are interested in Australian literature and publishing and being a part of this space – and we also have found that people who do those workshops end up being more involved with the *Suburban Review* either regularly submitting work or working with us. We're doing interviews for an associate editor position this afternoon or tomorrow, a number of those interviewees took part in the workshop, which led them to want to continue pursuing this field and particularly wanting to work with us as a team. So that's really fantastic – and demonstrates to us that we're not just in the role of delivering content, we're also participating in broadening the ways that people can access this as a career. – Claire Albrecht, *Suburban Review*.

Journals are such a rich laboratory for people moving into publishing or exploring roles within publishing. They get to see the holistic interaction of the writers with the editors, they get to see the role of volunteer reader teams, which extend their scope, significantly in terms of the numbers of people that actually have a really meaningful input. It's possible to learn and build connections in a really rich way. – Stephanie Holt, *Overland*.

Several organisations talked to us about how their program of activities worked to support the objectives of the organisation beyond publishing, and how their events, workshops, mentorships and prizes helped to build a context for their publication activity, and to provide meaningful ongoing opportunities for writers.

One of the perks of having such a small team is more control to work on the projects we want to work on! With *Liminal*, we began by platforming Asian Australian artists' practices through our interview series, and then we began to commission writers and artists to create work. And in the last few years we've been asking, how can we further support and upskill the writers, how can we give them more opportunities? So we began to run mentorships, we've had a writing residency, we run international writing workshops, and, of course we create literary publications... This is all anti-racist work dedicated to the literary arts, it's just that it's in different modes—because none of this kind of scaffolding exists for people of colour. – Leah Jing McIntosh, *Liminal*.

We think about those programs as working in synergy with what we're doing at the magazine, which is to create a place in which those who are interested in writing and the writing life come and have a sense of community and opportunity, whether that's through submitting their work to us participating in an online course, or applying for mentorship as well. And we do run other writing prizes, too. So increasingly, that's

been our focus, creating a space that supports and encourages and develops those interests. So increasingly, our magazine content has been shifting towards, and I mean, not exclusively, but towards the practice of writing craft, the critical work that we've spoken about, and narrowing in that focus slightly. – Rebecca Starford, *Kill Your Darlings*.

3) AUDIENCES

Literary journals are read online and in print. There are plenty of tired jokes about the limited audience for literary journals but our interviews reveal that there is a real deficit of knowledge about who reads Australian literary journals, especially online. There's great variation between organisations as to how they collect and use information about their audiences. Many organisations did not collect data about their audience beyond basic traffic statistics. Most organisations take an ad hoc approach to monitoring audiences, either because they lack the tools and knowledge to do so, or more frequently, because staff resources are so stretched they lack the time to do so.

Because most organisations have not undertaken any systematic monitoring or analysis of their audiences, the provision of training materials and support for audience analysis will yield rapid results. It will help organisations report their impact and reach better and allow Writers Australia better to understand the impact of literary journals as a group. Without this information it will be difficult for journals as a group or Writers Australia to make persuasive claims about their impact.

Who reads literary journals?

We note that problems in capturing an accurate account of the circulation and reach of literary journals are not new. A 2009 audit of circulation of Australia Council-funded publications observed the inadequacy of documentation and data provided by publications and included several caveats about the accuracy of its own reports.

All organisations understand that their work is read by different audiences who bring different expectations and preconceptions to the work.

One of the things that I see as really important for us is elevating new voices and bringing them into the conversation alongside writers who are more established. And, and in doing so, giving, bringing attention to their work, and introducing their work to other people in the publishing industry. So whether that's booksellers or literary agents or editors at publishing houses, I see journals as generating buzz around a younger writer or, or a newer writer, by placing them in a context of more established writers. – Alexandra Christie, *HEAT*.

Many interviewees reported disappointment at the low profile of literary journals in bookshops and on the festival circuit. While the print audience for Australian literary journals is not growing, the reach of journals online is continuing to expand. As we'll see, inconsistent data collection and a lack of guidance about how to measure digital audiences is hindering the ability of organisations as a group to make persuasive claims about their impact.

Not all survey respondents provided us with data about their audience size:

- Four organisations reported their print audience was below 1000 per edition.
- Seven organisations told us their audience fell within the 1000-5000 range.
- One print publication reached an audience within the 5000-10000 range.

Digital audiences were much larger although again, some organisations declined to provide data:

- Nine organisations reported a digital audience of less than 10,000 pageviews per month.
- Two organisations fell within the 10,000-30,000 range.
- Three organisations fell within the 30,000-50,000 range.
- Seven organisations reached a monthly digital audience of more than 50,000 pageviews.

More than half our survey respondents did not provide information about the age and gender of their audience; in most cases, interviewees later told us that this was because they did not know how to access this information. Of those journals that did provide information about the gender of their audience, their audiences were dominated by women. Of those that provided data about the age of their readers:

- Two organisations reported the majority of their audience was under 25.
- Five organisations reported the majority of their audience was between 25 and 40.
- Four organisations reported the majority of their audience was between 41 and 60.

The patchiness of this data points strongly to the conclusion that literary organisations require support and guidance in collecting data about their audience. We asked organisations about their preferred metric for measuring engagement. Those who did respond were split between website page views and site visitors – but again many didn't answer.

Most organisations reported that audience growth was either somewhat or very important to them – but we observe that it will be difficult to make persuasive arguments about the overall growth of the sector when data collection is so inconsistent. We see a very immediate need for Writers Australia to help organisations collect data about their digital audiences and report it to their funders.

Organisations use the following methods to help build their audiences:

- Annual subscriber drives
- In-kind promotion with other organisations
- Social media marketing and other forms of digital marketing
- Festival and other event appearances
- Promotion of new work by contributors.

Many organisations also made the point that their artistic programs were their most effective resource for audience growth: these organisations wanted to reach new readers by publishing great new work and by expanding their contributor cohort.

How do organisations learn about their audiences?

In our interviews we observed that many respondents were shaky on the details of audience data collection. Even those respondents who were able to discuss their organisation's use of, for example, Google Analytics in some detail, reported that their organisation didn't spend much time reflecting on website referrals and sources of traffic to their websites. Even though most literary organisations consider their digital footprint to be important, ten

organisations surveyed told us they only check their digital engagement monthly, or less frequently.

Organisations track their digital audiences using Google Analytics, primarily, though many organisations also drew on the data provided by proprietary content management systems such as WordPress and Squarespace. Several organisations told us that while they did have the capacity to track analytics, they were not able to prioritise retrieving this information and then using it to develop a marketing strategy.

Those who did use Google Analytics told us that it was most useful for pinpointing the geographical source of traffic, rather than providing any more granular demographic data. This allowed organisations to discover – often to their surprise – segments of their audience in unexpected locations, particularly international readers.

Several organisations told us they draw on demographic data from calls for submissions to build their understanding of their audience. Like surveys, submission forms provide more detailed demographic data that is not available via Google Analytics.

The place we most consistently get data is when we are doing calls for submissions. And if we're doing that through a platform, whether that's Submittable or Google Forms, we'll often get some really basic level audience data from that. So it's not necessarily who our readers are. But it's who our writers are and that has a pretty big overlap. – Georgia Coldebella, *Going Down Swinging*.

Funding determines the direction of the journal, and then also, the ethos of the Centre for Stories determines the direction of the journal. So Centre for Stories is interested in sharing stories from people from diverse backgrounds, and that would include First Nations voices, people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, LGBTQIA community and people living with disabilities. So we're really interested in representing those underrepresented communities. So those stories are what come forward first. – Logan Griffiths, *Portside Review*.

Only about a third of organisations survey their audience regularly. Organisations that do conduct surveys of their readers also added caveats about the problem of bias in surveys and treated them as an unreliable guide as to the demographic composition of their audience.

How is audience data used?

Overall analytics influence marketing and promotions rather than editorial. Most organisations want to understand better how readers engage with what they publish – but most organisations don't want this knowledge to encroach on programming decisions. Analytics help organisations understand what kind of new work connects with audiences, and if a piece reaches a large digital audience, allows editors to provide feedback and encouragement to writers in the form of traffic statistics. Organisations also use audience data to acquit grants – though as we've established, the data reported to funding agencies is inconsistent.

If we made our programming decisions based on what our traffic statistics tell us, our program would look very different. We want to present a program that is curated with confidence by the editorial team, rather than effectively curated by an algorithm. – Catriona Menzies-Pike, *Sydney Review of Books*.

As a small organisation, when we are having strategic conversations around our metrics, our main aim is to increase readership and increase our amount of subscribers.... If we had a metric that showed which pieces were more successful in terms of views, we wouldn't then say let's get more work like that, or get that person to do more. It would be more like okay, what is it about this piece that is resonating? Is this a topic that is important right now? Is this a writer who is currently releasing a book and so they have a lot of buzz already? We would also probably look at the self-promotion that that contributor had done and use that as a template for how we ask contributors to promote their work once the issue is out. – Claire Albrecht, *Suburban Review*.

A lot of this discussion comes around SEO, around titles and subtitles for pieces. So there's a lot of strategy behind that as well at the time of publication. For example, we look at the end of each year at all of the content that we've published, what's performed well, in terms of reads, and what's sitting down towards the bottom and we have a discussion which then that informs our ideas about commissioning for the following year, and what we might or might not do again next year. – Rebecca Starford, *Kill Your Darlings*.

It's great to know how many people are reading which articles and so pageviews are really important, especially if it's a particular big piece, or something of a very timely or controversial nature. Of course you also want to know unique visitors, you want to know who the people are, and who's coming back and so on. I'd like to develop a set of indicators that make sense to me, but also make sense in terms of what *Meanjin* wants to achieve in the next little while. If we were in a situation where we had to grow, grow, grow a lot in the next little while, then I'd be very interested in numbers of subscribers on the one hand, but also unique visitors, and how they then translate into subscribers. And questions like, when there's a spike in subscription is there also a spike in unique visitors? It's the way that those indicators relate to each other that is important, as well, and making sure that we're not just viewing steps in isolation of a broad strategy. – Esther Anatolitis, *Meanjin*.

4) THE TRANSITION TO DIGITAL

Journals publish and promote new work online. We spoke to only one organisation that didn't have a website; the majority of our case studies either publish all their work online or grant equal weight to online and print publishing. Journals manage submissions using digital tools and usually work with the writers they commission through digital interfaces. Even those organisations that don't publish online use their websites as digital shopfronts, and many sell merchandise or print publications via their website. As in any other workplace, most organisational administration and internal communications are conducted using digital tools.

Most organisations we spoke to use social media to promote new published work, to advertise events and to build the visibility of their organisation. Our interviews were conducted during a period of tumult for Twitter/X, and this prompted many interviewees to reflect on their organisation's reliance on tools distributed by Big Tech. In a similar vein, many organisations commented on how changes to settings at Facebook and the exodus of users from Facebook had had an impact on the effectiveness of the platform for connecting with audiences. Although responses varied between organisations, the most effective social platform for driving traffic used by our cohort was Twitter/X, with organisations with younger audiences using Instagram to build visibility and engage with audiences.

In what follows we map this investment in print and the transition to digital, before exploring the attraction of digital publishing for literary organisations, and the various challenges encountered by organisations as their transition to digital.

The transition to digital

We are about slow poetry. This is not send me the email, make a decision and give it to me. Lay it out straight out away. This is slow poetry, you send it in with a stamped, self addressed envelope for return. – Pi O, *Unusual Work*.

Although most Australian literary journals currently publish part of their program online, and several only exist in digital form, print is still highly significant to organisations, to writers and to readers. Even as media convergence and cost propel organisations towards publishing more of their program online and undertaking more organisational and editorial work in digital environments, many organisations continue to invest in print publication and distribution. Many editors spoke to us about their attachment to print publication and the significance of being *in print* for writers. Although almost all the organisations we spoke to publish online, being in print is a genuine milestone for authors.

It's been very rewarding for us to see writers, especially emerging writers, holding a physical magazine. And we also wanted to print *Debris* because we wanted to draw people from the art world and the graphic design world as well, who wouldn't normally pick up a magazine to read short stories, but who might be interested by a photographer that we work with. – Julia Flaster, *Debris*.

Organisations tend to be strategic about what goes to print and what gets published online. Some organisations present a selection of their print content online, others curate a separate

program altogether for their digital audience. Digital publication makes space for new work that does not fit into print publications, or that needs to be published more quickly.

These different strategic approaches reflect the different priorities of organisations: building an audience who may subscribe to a print journal, building a digital-only audience, expanding program range, increasing visibility within the sector. We observed that it was larger organisations with greater staff resources who took a strategic approach to digital publishing.

Digital is good for expanding capacity, it's good in terms of that kind of immediate reactivity for things that otherwise just don't make it into the circulation structure. – Evelyn Araluen, *Overland*.

We're published quarterly. But the way individual pieces get disseminated can vary. We unlock pieces that are behind the paywall for our newsletter; we unlock pieces from both the archive and from the new edition, over the course of its publication cycle. So we use digital to circulate and to alert readers to work. And we also use digital to circulate call outs. This seems to be particularly effective, actually. We get a very, very, very good response from writers when we announce a new edition, or announce a new initiative. That's something that's become more and more apparent and more and more valuable for us in the eight years I've been here. – John Tague, *Griffith Review*.

The difference so far between the blog and what's in print is that we will tend to commission or respond to work that is very timely for the blog, work that needs to come out now, and, you know, be out there. And that's something that goes to Meanjin's broader role around fostering and facilitating and publishing the finest Australian writing. Some of that can wait for months, and some of it can go online. And obviously, when you publish online, there's real immediacy, you can track readers, unique visitors. We've got a social media strategy, we've got a mailing list you can subscribe to and you'll be sent at 7am the Meanjin daily reading. And we know that those are very popular. – Esther Anatolitis, *Meanjin*.

For all the advantages of digital publication, however, it does not provide substantial income for organisations, especially compared to print.

Digital and post-Covid environment

Several organisations cited the Covid lockdowns as a catalyst for changes in attitudes to digital programs and events.

Without trivialising the great suffering of the pandemic, we had miraculous outcomes digitally because everything converted. Our festival events went digital, of course, or hybrid, and now they remain hybrid. We have significantly increased engagement in the last three years. It was just a natural benefit of moving into the digital space. – Jacinta LePlastrier, *Australian Poetry*.

The internet itself is a record of how the pandemic changed people's attitudes to how they could get audiences. I think that there's something in trying to remember that the

pandemic was awful in many respects, but it was also a creative watershed because it forced artists to think, to and rethink, what they really needed to do to get their art across. — Stephen J. Williams, *Unfurl*.

The advantage of digital

Online publication is cheap, accessible and flexible. This flexibility benefits audiences *and* writers. Most organisations have been publishing online for a long time— or have always been online. We found broad consensus about the main points of appeal for digital publishing: it is cheaper and allows journals to connect with bigger audiences. For many smaller and newer organisations, digital publishing is what allows them to exist at all. New journals that launch with no budget have a strong incentive to start publishing online rather than in print. For organisations with distributed production teams, digital publication tools allow them to work and publish material in real-time collaboration.

It's giving us more opportunities to publish more writers with lower production costs. It's giving us opportunities to publish those writers and for those writers to reach international audiences, which would be prohibitive with freight. — Vern Field, *Island*.

We started out in print and that was tapping into zine culture. The people who were running the journal were mostly based in Melbourne so they were able to work on it together, and they were able to have working bees to get them mailed out and do all of the stuff that is involved in having a physical object that you need to get to physical people. Once you start having a team that's not all in one place, that becomes extremely difficult to coordinate. The cost of print is also prohibitive unless you have scaled to an extent where it's a decent return on investment. I wasn't around when they were doing the print journal, but I know that our reach is now significantly larger. And we're able to sell the journal to anyone who is online, which makes a huge difference and are able to access it immediately. There's no risk of orders going missing. You know, it's just safer, more cost effective, and I think more generally effective for us. And I wouldn't say necessarily that that would apply to all journals, but I would imagine it applies to most smaller, independent journals outside of those that, specifically want to produce a physical object as the aim. — Claire Albrecht, *Suburban Review*.

The increasing cost of postage was cited by several editors as a factor in bringing more of their programs online. Pi O of *Unusual Work* recalled the Category B classification for postage, which effectively subsidised the distribution of magazines, as a great benefit for literary journals.

Digital publication means that literary journals are more accessible to readers – and that established journals can connect with new audiences who might not otherwise read their print offerings. Without the need to cover postage and printing costs, digital subscriptions can be offered at a lower price point to readers. Organisations with existing print audiences reported that their print subscriber base was an older audience whereas digital publishing allowed them to speak to younger readers.

Digitality is important to *Liminal* because when you do anti-racist work, it's important to lower the barriers to access. If you have a focus on community, but your

community can't access the journal or work you're publishing, what's the point? You can't simply assume that everyone will be able to access or purchase the book or publication. It needs to be available, and the digital medium allows for this. – Leah Jing McIntosh, *Liminal*.

Online publication makes literary journals more accessible to audiences in Australia and around the world. It opens up the possibility of reaching new audiences and participating in transnational conversations about literature, as well as situating Australian writing in its many international contexts.

When I started here, *Cordite* was by no means provincial. But our audience was mostly domestic. And now, it has a readership that's about 43 per cent international. The only way that's happening is if it's free, accessible from anywhere on the planet – or the moon, if you happen to be there. – Kent MacCarter, *Cordite*.

If digital publication allows journals to build new communities around their work, it also allows writers to share their work more easily, whether with personal networks or to build connections with communities of practitioners in Australia and internationally. For publishers working with writers and communities in certain geographical regions, online publishing allows them to surmount the cost and logistical challenges of reaching particular audiences in those regions.

Having your work online, especially for emerging artists, emerging writers, has a lot of value. There is prestige in print publication – but there's also advantages to digital publication for writers. People share links to their work, or they send it out to their communities and that gets their work out there. You can't necessarily send a print journal to all of your relatives with a copy of a short story that you've written that talks about your grandma, but you can send a link to them to share your work with them. So I do think that even though print is really beautiful, and I myself love reading a print journal, there is a particular value to work being online for emerging writers especially. – Gemma Parker, *Saltbush Review*.

Finally, digital publication also affords flexibility to editors and writers.

We have a lot more flexibility with the online deadlines. When we work with emerging writers, I often try to bring them in through our online program, because we have time to develop work. If they've never been edited before, if it takes them a long time to figure out a draft, and especially in the pandemic, like if, if someone's just like, I'm gonna ghost you for two months, we can say, Great, we'll see you in three months. We can do that with online publishing, we can't do that with print – Hollen Singleton, *Going Down Swinging*.

How do organisations manage digital?

Most organisations had at least one staff member devoted to digital activities and most organisations had engaged staff in some form of training to upskill. Content management, accessible design and digital strategy were the skills most in demand. Only one organisation had sought out accredited training for staff. Overwhelmingly, organisations gain digital skills

either by peer-to-peer instruction within an organisation, or by self-tuition. If organisations do have staff devoted to digital, those staff members are primarily concerned with content management, as well as the development and management of digital assets. Some are involved with coding and design but this work is mostly outsourced. Few organisations have in-house design or coding capacity.

Most organisations see lots of room for improvement in their platforms. Most organisations use Wordpress or a similar content management system such as Squarespace to publish new work, and are able to access open source resources to make on-the-go improvements to their site. There's a difference between making do and having digital infrastructure that meets an organisation's needs: survey respondents told us they wanted sophisticated websites with intuitive design and functionality. Accessibility was also raised by many respondents: organisations want to make the work they publish accessible to as wide an audience as possible, but lack the skills to deliver accessible outcomes and lack the budget to contract someone else to do so.

What are the challenges?

Resourcing the development of digital infrastructure emerged as the biggest challenge for literary journals adapting to the digital space, followed by skills shortage. Organisations frequently reported a disconnect between the pressure to go digital, and the resources required to actually do that properly. 'Resourcing, training, funding, skills development, we are flying by the seat of our pants' – this comment, from an interviewee who asked to remain anonymous, sums up the situation for most of the organisations we spoke to. Organisations want to take more steps into the digital space, but they lack the resources to do so.

It is expensive to develop digital infrastructure, which includes websites, subscription payment systems, or submissions management portals. There is very limited funding available through public funding agencies to undertake this work. Small organisations – and particularly this is the case for micro-organisations – struggle to secure funding for organisational costs. Paying writers took priority for such organisations over paying staff, and certainly over paying digital costs.

Many small organisations talked about finding digital contractors – designers and developers – through peer networks who agreed to work for lower rates because of an interest in the organisation. The downside for organisations is that this meant their job was low priority compared to highly paid jobs; their website development projects took up to several years to complete. Whereas larger and better resourced organisations were able to bring in external contractors to build their websites, albeit with limited budgets, smaller and micro organisations tended to improvise. Organisations find workarounds, skill-up using online tutorials, and hope for the best. In a cultural environment that rewards innovation, organisations find themselves working in ways that are slow, inefficient, stressful and highly risky.

We don't have an IT department, we don't have a website developer, we don't have IT support. We just have me, you know, so I'm the one running the website, I'm the one running social media, I'm overseeing all of the work going onto the screen. And I have a team of unpaid interns who help me out as well. They're not highly skilled professionals in IT, or software or anything like that. And when we have an issue,

which could potentially cost a couple of subscribers, it's up to us to figure out. Those issues, which should take a couple of seconds, can take two days. – Logan Griffiths, *Portside Review*.

None of us have spent a huge amount of time on social media. And so in terms of digital media savvy, and also just the mechanics of the website, there are things that we are constantly finding challenging. We are really currently working within what we can do and what we know how to do ourselves. – Gemma Parker, *Saltbush Review*.

You don't have to have a website, you could just use Substack. You don't have to code anything, if you don't want to. You don't even have to have a team, if you can design things so that they are readable, accessible, attractive, engaging, and get that out anywhere, you can have a journal. But if you can't do those things, you're very unlikely to build an audience. And you're probably not reproducing the work in a way that's as respectful and true to the contributor. – Claire Albrecht, *Suburban Review*.

We would love to have resources so that we can train staff and upskill them, particularly in design, software and so on. Because those are the sorts of skills that can be incredibly expensive to acquire, you usually have to take a specialised course to do so. And it's really hard to get funding for that, because it's not sexy, and it raises questions about what you are doing. And conversely, questions arise like, what are you doing to ensure retention if you're going to make investment in professional development? It's really hard to make those kinds of justifications in your applications. – Evelyn Araluen, *Overland*.

Stephen J. Williams describes digital design as an 'intractable form' problem; he was one of many editors who pointed to the particular problems of publishing poetry in a digital environment.

On a responsive website, poetry will never look quite the way an author wants it to. On a phone unless you're writing short left aligned stanzas it never will. And so a lot of what we publish looks pretty good on a laptop, and on most iPads and on desktops, but it just looks like total shit on a phone. So I'm constantly drumming that message. That's something that even the slickest most modern website wouldn't be able to cure, because it's the nature of the literature. You know, that's not going to change. – Kent MacCarter, *Cordite*.

I think poetry dies on the net. We publish on the net. Very rarely – but when I'm asked, I consider and normally I do it, because I know somebody, or someone's approached me to do it. But I get no, no boost out of seeing a poem on the net.. it means nothing to me. – Pi O, *Unusual Work*

Digital Preservation

Several interviewees discussed the digital preservation and distribution of their archive. Most worried that work published only online would become obsolete or impossible to trace, especially if their organisations folded.

These things can disappear without trace. In a print format, we've got every copy of the magazine back to 1979. And so has the State Library of Tasmania. And probably the National Library. It's on people's bookshelves and in university libraries. But where is *Islet* [*Island's* previous website]? *Islet* is on a server in our office that could

easily be lost. I honestly don't know how people would even access stuff that they might have published in *Islet* in 2008. There are new models now models of how to store and preserve online content but still that's another aspect of this whole thing about online and digital, the challenge of how to preserve things when a website's become defunct, like that. – Vern Field, *Island*.

If there were funding for digital-only enterprises, then the whole thing about archiving, and permanence, and relationships to institutional archiving of digital assets would largely be solved. The other thing that would be solved is that the digital work itself would probably end up looking a bit better. I wouldn't have to use so many free tools. The *Unfurl* website could be made to work more effectively as the central connecting point for the individual *Unfurl* issues. – Stephen J. Williams, *Unfurl*.

Presently literary organisations are not well served in terms of practical support or funding for digital technology. Many editors saw the lack of prospects for digital skills development and infrastructure as part of a bigger funding shortfall for organisational development. All organisations see the potential of better digital infrastructure to make their publications more accessible, to reach more readers, to spotlight their archive, and to increase the pleasure of encountering the work they publish. One survey respondent put it succinctly: 'Funding good design for usability, navigation and a beautiful experience.' Editors and production staff work with the resources they have to present work in a way that is accessible and reflects the intentions of authors; most expressed some frustration with the limitations of the DIY approach, especially in terms of time and opportunities lost.

5) LABOUR

It's a continual struggle to pay all the people we want to pay and to be paid ourselves. – Hollen Singleton, *Going Down Swinging*.

Overwork, burnout and low rates of pay are themes that emerged repeatedly in our interviews, and so did the chronic need for more paid operational staff. This was no surprise – the literary sector is notorious for low rates of pay and poor work conditions. Indeed the first major surprise to emerge from our survey of editors was that most staff in literary organisations were paid at all; rates of volunteerism were far lower than expected. When we moved to the interview stage of the research we were able to understand better these results. Although most staff in most organisations are paid, pay rates vary enormously. In literary journals based in universities, staff pay is tallied to the university award (although some editors reported that reductions in workload allocations made it more difficult to produce their journals). In organisations that are not based in universities staff are paid on a stipend or fee basis and these rates do not reflect the enormous amount of labour they cover. The confusion about what constitutes a fair rate of pay for artswriters and the inconsistency of rates across the group of organisations points to a role for Writers Australia in setting guidelines for pay that are communicated to organisations and to the panels reviewing funding applications.

Literary organisations are all small arts organisations with relatively small budgets and low organisational headcounts. Half of the organisations we surveyed employ between three and six staff. A further six reported employing between six and ten staff members, and only two employed more than ten staff. We note that headcount here does not equal full-time equivalent employment.

Only three organisations who responded to our survey employed all their staff on a fulltime basis. Most organisations employ staff on a combination of casual, contract and part-time arrangements. Few organisations can offer staff a liveable wage. Our survey showed high levels of staff turnover in literary organisations as people leave their positions for roles with better pay. Most of the editors we spoke to had previously worked in other literary organisations. Editors and other artswriters learn new skills in literary journals that help them build careers – but often at great personal cost.

We observed in our interviews and in our survey a great deal of reticence about pay rates for artswriters in literary organisations. All organisations we spoke to expressed a desire to pay their staff better, and to value the labour of artswriters as well as artists. But many organisations, especially smaller organisations, reported a desire to prioritise artist payments over staff payments. It is also the case that organisations are able to access funding to pay contributors more readily than funding to pay staff. No matter the size of the organisation, we heard consistent reports of the difficulty of sourcing income or funding to cover new staff positions. Organisations were wary of asking peer-based funding panels for support for staff and were concerned that asking for higher rates of pay for staff would compromise their ability to secure funding.

The lack of paid operational staff means organisations are inhibited from pursuing funding opportunities, collaborations and partnerships with other organisations, deepening their work

with writers, and promoting new writing more effectively. It also generates burnout and high staff turnover. And as we were repeatedly told in our interviews, low rates of pay, insecure work arrangements and a basic shortage of paid staff positions entrenches a lack of diversity in literary organisations. In literary organisations, artswriters from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are poorly represented, and so are First Nations artswriters and artswriters from working class backgrounds. Most organisations did not meet their own standards for workplace diversity and recognised that their organisations would be strengthened were they able to recruit and retain a more diverse cohort of editors, marketing, events and production staff and administrators.

Who gets paid within organisations?

The conversations we had with editors about labour and literary journals all circled back to funding. Organisations were not able to create new staff positions because they could not secure funding to do so. Many organisations reported being in a bind. Small organisations were advised not to seek funding for operational costs such as new staff positions when submitting applications for project funding – but were either not eligible or not competitive for the forms of multi-year or operational funding that would allow them to employ more staff.

All organisations pointed to ways they would be strengthened by being able to pay existing staff fair rates and to bring on new staff.

As part of our interviews and surveys, we asked editors to estimate the breakdown in organisational budgets between paying staff and paying writers. We might get sidetracked into reflecting on the philosophical and political dimensions of this decision to prioritise the payment of contributors over staff, and wonder at the way creative labour is particularly valued in this milieu as against the work of operational staff. Many editors, we should note, disputed this distinction between artistic labour and organisational work, arguing that editorial roles are essentially creative roles.

The primary reason for this, as reported by organisations large and small, is that journals are able to secure funding to pay writers but not to pay staff. We heard multiple stories of organisations being advised not to seek funding for staff, or that their funding applications had been rejected by peer panels because they wanted to pay staff rather than writers. Most small organisations talked about their deep frustration with funding models that, in their experience, do not allow them to apply for operational funding with any prospect of success.

We really have gone from nothing. Running the journal with no money to running the journal with money. We're learning a lot now. In terms of what it means to run a journal with funding, the next step will be thinking more about the money itself, where the money goes, where the money comes from. At the moment, the pitch that we put forward was making sure that the artists that were making the *Saltbush Review* happen were being paid for their work. We all still –I have to say this – we all do a massive amount of volunteer hours. There's no way that anyone is getting paid the amount of work they're doing. – Gemma Parker, *Saltbush Review*.

There are no standard rates of pay for artswriters. Editors and artswriters employed by journals that are located within universities are paid according to university awards but other organisations effectively set their own rates of pay.

Every time you apply for grants, they tell you that they will not fund artists below, like market rates, or whatever sort of wording they use. I would love them to actually

define what those rates are and what they're willing to pay for. Both in terms of artist rates and staff salaries. – Georgia Coldebella, *Going Down Swinging*.

Several editors spoke about the dilemma of whether to include volunteer labour as a form of in-kind income that they were able to include in budgets for funding applications. Many perceived being able to add in-kind contributions in this manner gave their organisations a competitive advantage when applying for funding but worried that it further devalued their labour and made it more difficult to make a case for paid staff positions.

Access, diversity and inclusion

We asked all organisations to provide a snapshot of the diversity of their organisation in terms of staff. We invited participants to reflect on whether they had the resources – financial, organisational, cultural – required to support artswriters from diverse backgrounds. Our conversations were dominated by the inability of organisations to offer adequately remunerated paid positions to artswriters from diverse backgrounds. There was a consensus among our interviewees that the priority for supporting artswriters from diverse backgrounds was offering fair pay — even as many acknowledged that their organisations had gaps in cultural knowledge. Many interviewees expressed a desire to differentiate their organisation from the structural racism that they saw had characterised the history of the sector, and expressed deep frustration that they were unable to fund paid roles for a more diverse staff.

- Six organisations out of 29 organisations (20 per cent) reported employing at least one First Nations staff member.
- Twenty organisations (68 per cent) reported employing at least one Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (including people who identify as migrants, refugees, non-English speaking background or people of colour) staff member.

We note that these figures do not reflect whether the staff members were fulltime, part-time or employed on a contract basis. These reports need to be tempered by the comments above about the unfair or exploitative employment arrangements that are the sector norm. Nine organisations reported working with volunteers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and none reported working with First Nations volunteers.

We note that the group of editors and managers we spoke to for this research were a less diverse group than the organisations they represented, and that the workplace diversity of organisations as such reported above does not necessarily reflect the distribution of creative or managerial decision-making. We see scope for further research into the experiences of First Nations artswriters and artswriters from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds in the literary sector, especially with regard to structural racism, burnout and retention. This is particularly in view of the very high levels of behavioural and attitudinal engagement with the arts identified among First Nations people and particularly people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds in the 2019 National Arts Participation Survey. We're grateful to Michelle Cahill, Andrea Yang and Monique Nair for directing us to this research.

Most organisations expressed a desire to see the diversity of the Australian population represented in their organisations – and most organisations reported that they did not meet their own standards for diversity. Most organisations reported that they were short of where they wanted to be in terms of access and inclusion of artswriters from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and First Nations artswriters.

Most editors reported that their organisations were reckoning internally with a lack of staff diversity and the impact of that lack on their contributors and their ability to reach audiences.

Some – but not all – editors were concerned about their ability to provide culturally appropriate support to writers. The frustrations we heard from organisations about the difficulties of funding new staff positions were often tied to their aspirations to be a more inclusive organisation. Some organisations expressed caution about offering exploitative work arrangements to artswriters from diverse backgrounds who were already being asked to carry heavy loads in the sector. This was especially the case for First Nations artswriters, who many editors perceived to be overburdened with requests to assist organisations to decolonise their workplaces and programs.

What we heard from organisations was that they wanted to be able to offer permanent or long-term contracts to artswriters from diverse backgrounds within their organisations, but were not able to secure funding to do so. In the absence of this funding, organisations found other ways to include and engage editors and artswriters from diverse backgrounds in their programming decisions, editorial processes and organisational structures. Partnerships with other organisations (such as [black&write!](#)), collaborations, and funded guest-editor models were the most frequent strategies we heard about.

Many editors pointed to the [black&write!](#) program at the State Library of Queensland as providing needed support to organisations working with First Nations writers.

I am feeling really lucky and grateful that [black&write!](#) exists, because, you know, we don't have the cultural oversight capacity within Meanjin, nor Melbourne University publishing to you know, make sure that that happens at the moment. – Esther Anatolitis, *Meanjin*.

Rita Dove's concept of principled intersectional curation was mentioned by several editors as providing a model for their work:

Another term to do with the principal curating is cultural safety. And for me cultural safety isn't just about who you're publishing and how you're working with the person, it's about who is reading it, how it's distributed, how it's disseminated, what spaces it goes into. An obvious example would be launch events.

This must be a culturally safe space, you have got to be known for that. People have to know when we do open call that that they can submit to us. And if they're selected, they also are going to be in a culturally safe space, and not just for their own work but for everyone. – Jacinta LePlastrier, *Australian Poetry*.

Many interviewees reflected on the success over the past decade of campaigns for better pay for artists in this context. We see an urgent need to initiate a similar public conversation about wage fairness for artswriters in the literary sector.

6) FUNDING

Without some sort of funding for organisational development and growth, and change and experimentation, and innovation, and training and all of those things, how do we grow? How do we thrive? How do we do more than what I believe *Island* has done since 1979, which is scrape by? We scrape by doing the best we can to stay alive, and to produce good outcomes for writers and to build the literary sector and all of those contributions to culture. But in terms of the organisational strength, and the improvements in organisational practice, and capacity, and technology, and you know, new ways of doing things. How do you find that? That's one of the biggest challenges. – Vern Field, *Island*.

When we set out, we were determined not to centre funding shortfalls in our research. We encouraged participants to point to policy shifts that would benefit their organisations, to reflect on strategies that had worked for their organisations that might have wider application, and to articulate their needs in more detail beyond a blunt desire for funding. And yet most of our conversations returned to resources and to omit funding from this report would be to distort the finding of our research. As one survey respondent wrote, 'Literature is at the heart of so many artforms yet it remains the least funded. This continued decline in funding is absolutely unsustainable for the sector, authors and organisations.'

The cycle of funding is exhausting. And it contributes to burnout significantly. And it also leaves us really vulnerable, because it's very hard to create any sort of long term strategy, when you're thinking year by year in project terms. – Catherine Noske, *Westerly*.

What follows brings together feedback about funding and the impact they have on literary organisations. The top-level funding is no surprise: literary organisations are underfunded; investment in the literary sector is overdue. Beneath this, however, a set of common themes emerge. Organisations reported being frustrated by the inaccessibility of operational or multiyear funding and by the unpredictability of project funding. Sudden shifts in funding allocations due to state or federal government policy change have significant effects at the organisational level (several organisations, for example, mentioned the Creative Victoria restructure), as do funding cuts. Many interviewees expressed their frustration with funding priorities changing year in year out without being signalled to applicants.

You can't forward plan, you can't tell people, we want you to have this role for this year, and then we'll move you on to this role, if you just don't know if that role will exist. We had a new board treasurer who was chatting to us a couple of weeks ago about, you know, yearly budgeting plans and that sort of stuff. We're just sitting there going, it's funding based, we can tell you per project and per thing, and but we have no certainty at any point about whether that will come through. – Georgia Coldebella, *Going Down Swinging*.

Reliance on state funding

Attitudes to government funding varied across the sector. Some organisations were highly resistant to the idea of government funding, seeing it as a force of bureaucratisation that undermined creative freedom. In the words of one editor, 'we're not a business and we never make money'. Others expressed cynicism about government funding:

But, as far as funding goes, I don't feel that there's much point. The whole point of the project, from my point of view, was to find out if artists and audiences could be liberated from the oversight, good or bad, that comes with government money.
—Stephen J. Williams, *Unfurl*.

More than half the organisations we surveyed receive at least half their funding from government. Those organisations with more diverse income streams tended to be larger and more established – and took an entrepreneurial approach to running their organisations.

We're a highly entrepreneurial magazine. My aim has always been to preserve and protect ABR for the next generation. I think we've done that. Partnerships of all kinds – intellectual and commercial – have been and remain central to what we do. The introduction of a Patrons Program ten years ago, when we reconstituted and attained charitable status, is one example of that engagement with the literary community. Private donations have now completely transformed our budget. Last year, about a quarter of our budget came from private donations, not government, not philanthropic foundations – just individuals writing cheques. Ten years ago, that was nil. – Peter Rose, *Australian Book Review*.

Many organisations spoke with frustration about the administrative resources required to apply for funding, especially philanthropic funding, and being caught in a vicious cycle of not having enough paid staff to develop strategies and compete applications to pay new staff members. Although organisations are encouraged to seek non-government sources of funding, this seemed unrealistic for most organisations who reported that they lacked the staff resources or knowledge to access philanthropy or run donations campaigns. Time-intensive income generating activities such as applying for philanthropic funding or establishing donations platforms are not practical for small organisations.

Project v operational funding

Smaller and micro-organisations rely on government project funding to deliver their programs. Many editors reported that program funding, whether provided by the Australia Council or by state governments, is a form of de facto operational funding. But being project funding, it is unpredictable, irregular, creates a perceived pressure to innovate and rarely supports organisations to pay their core staff.

I think if you're talking about what funding should look like, a lot of it comes down to the fact that project-based grants want outcomes. They want you to tell them what exciting, shiny thing you want to do. What is more valuable for us is having base level operational funding. Because a lot of our really cool stuff is not flashy and shiny. You know, we're doing online publishing and often that's just, here's a fiction piece, here's a poem. Those are all really, really valuable things to, you know, the individual artists and writers that we're working with, we think that they're great. But it's a harder thing to sell to a funding body, when you're like, we're going to keep doing what we're doing. There's very little in terms of sustaining an organisation. It can be hard to get like regular old keep-that-organisation-going funding. – Hollen Singleton, *Going Down Swinging*.

Many small and micro-organisations told us they had not been able to secure operational or multiyear funding because of the scale of their organisations.

I've been involved with *Cordite* for twelve years. It is only really in the past year that there's been even a slight acknowledgement that small and micro-organisations do have rent to pay and communications bills and administration in the way that larger

organisations do. These costs never ever fit with the fine print of project-based annual funding, which is what most micro and many small organisations are eligible to go after. And that has not really been a tenable way to run lasting organisations. Every eleven months, you're unsure if you're gonna get funding ever again. – Kent MacCarter, *Cordite*.

Funding criteria

Many organisations expressed frustration with what they saw as misleading or confusing criteria in funding rounds. For smaller and emerging organisations, the difficulties of navigating funding applications processes were frequently mentioned, especially making sense of industry jargon. Often organisations were not aware of funding opportunities until deadlines had passed. Emerging organisations, usually staffed by volunteers or underpaid administrative labour, weren't optimistic about their prospects for funding success and many found the administrative processes onerous and confusing. Larger organisations also reported that the administrative load required to develop funding applications put a strain on their resources.

Organisations reported being encouraged to pay artists market or award rates for their work, without any guidance as to what those rates were. On the whole organisations recognise the guidance provided by the MEAA and ASA for contributor payments, although most small and micro organisations are not able to pay contributors at those rates. Pay rates for artists — for editorial, production and administrative staff — are not, as discussed above, standardised and organisations would benefit from clearer guidelines about industry standard rates of pay.

We heard several complaints too about the bureaucratic abstraction of funding criteria. Often organisations didn't understand why their funding applications were unsuccessful, beyond the general competitiveness of the field. Many organisations told us they wanted more insight into why their applications had not been successful.

Cooperation and collaboration

We wanted to understand the ways that literary organisations currently cooperate and collaborate. Although many organisations spoke about funding precarity fueling a sense of competition between peer organisations, throughout our interviews we were told that organisations wanted to work more closely with their peers, to share knowledge and to work in a more collegiate fashion — but that they lacked the contacts or staff resources to advance such interactions.

I don't feel as if I'm working in isolation, but I think literary journals collectively are working, toiling away far more in the dark than they should be. – Kent MacCarter, *Cordite*.

When I started as editor at the SRB in 2015, I really sought connections with peers, who were editing other journals or involved in the production of other journals because I wanted people to talk about the work that I was doing. I've committed resources to build a network of journal editors and of arts workers that is distinct from the communities of creative practitioners that cluster around journals because I think it's so important that we share knowledge and resources. It's hard not to feel very isolated. And I think the COVID shutdowns really worked to undo some of the networks that were forming. So too, there's the constant funding scarcity which undermines the capacity of organisations to share knowledge, to share resources,

and to collaborate in meaningful ways. – Catriona Menzies-Pike, *Sydney Review of Books*.

Many editors of emerging organisations reflected on the steep learning curves of founding a journal, and told us that they wished they'd been able to access mentorship or connect with more experienced peers in the sector, especially to help navigate funding opportunities and establish governance processes.

We used the term 'literary ecology' to frame our questions about cooperation and collaboration. Although this is a term in wide circulation, we encountered resistance to this language from many editors, who argued that the metaphor provided a weak model for understanding the literary sector. It's undeniable that it's an ecology, one editor told us, the issue is whether it is thriving or not. Many pointed to the way that institutional contexts and restrictions can inhibit forms of collaboration. It was also observed by many that perceived competitiveness over funding worked to undermine prospects for collaboration.

I do think that I act with an awareness of a literary ecology, I think a lot of people working in the sector do so. And whether or not it's always directly felt and experienced as an ecology in the sense that there is collaboration, that there is dialogue and cross publication engagement, I think there's a lot of that energy and a lot of that goodwill in the community. That doesn't always succeed in the face of other kinds of institutional restrictions and contexts. And I would say that, by and large, that does not come from arts workers in literary journals, I would say that that is a much more top down kind of restriction that's placed upon us by different funding bodies by different, you know, institutions and contexts and affiliations. And that that can sometimes breed forms of competitiveness, or perhaps misunderstanding. – Evelyn Araluen, *Overland*.

We've found it easier to cooperate with international bodies than local organisations. They're more open, and there's a willingness to be involved, to collaborate. When it comes to Australia, it's kind of like, Oh, you've got the funding? Oh can you pay for that? We're in the same boat. So I totally understand it. – Logan Griffiths, *Portside Review*.

The thing around collaboration is that the resources we have, and by that I mean the time and staffing, are so restricted that it's really hard to think outside of our own everyday operations, to think beyond just basically surviving. That's not to say that there isn't the impetus or enthusiasm to collaborate and to work together more often. - Rebecca Starford, *Kill Your Darlings*.

Recommendations

Australian literature has been underfunded relative to other artforms for decades. This has been to the detriment of Australian writers – and the people who work in the literary organisations that support them. Following the release of Revive, the federal government's new cultural policy, the 2025 launch of Writers Australia creates a hopeful space for future initiatives and investment. We see fair pay for artswriters as the priority for future investment — and there is an important role for Writers Australia to play in setting standards in this regard. Without fairly paid artswriters, the aspirations of Australian literary journals to represent the Australian population in its demographic diversity will remain unmet, and so too will their ambitions to provide meaningful, culturally-safe editorial support to all Australian writers as they develop new work.

Advocating for our cultural impact

- Within the literary sector and the cultural sector more broadly the cultural impact of literary journals is under-rated. **Advocates for literacy journals need to make visible all the work we do**, in funding allocations, in policy design, and in the structure of Writers Australia. This work includes:
 - Publication of new work
 - Building audiences for Australian literature
 - Professional development and income for writers
 - Nurturing new talent through mentorship and editorial support
 - Platforms for First Nations and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse writers
 - Supporting the development of experimental, non-commercial and innovative new work
- We recommend Writers Australia develop a framework for auditing the cultural impact of literary journals in a given year, including such metrics as total number of authors published, number of first-time authors published, diversity of authors published, book deals and other commissions that arise as a consequence of publication in literary journals, invitations to teach, appear at events and collaborate that arise as a consequence of publication in literary journals.

Funding and investment

- **Investment in funded positions for artswriters in literary journals is urgently required:** to remedy the chronic rates of underpay in the sector; to allow organisations better to meet the needs of writers and readers; and to ensure that the sector reflects the diversity of the Australian population.
- We recommend that funded positions for First Nations artswriters and artswriters from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds be prioritised, especially for leadership and creative decision-making roles.
- We recommend specific investment in operational funding for small and micro-organisations that allow these organisations to offer paid staff roles for 12-36 months and to contribute to administrative costs.
- Development of accessible resources to support emerging and micro-organisations apply for funding.
- Facilitation of grant and funding mentorship for journals via Writers Australia.

Labour

- **Writers Australia needs to show sector leadership and circulate clear guidelines to organisations – and to grant assessors – regarding fair rates of**

pay for artists and artworkers. The forms of community accountability modelled by the MEAA Charter for Freelancers provide some guidance.

- We recommend Writers Australia collaborate with the MEAA to develop guidelines for the employment of artworkers in small literary organisations. These guidelines should cover rates of pay, superannuation and other contractual matters.
- Unpaid labour is often concealed by in-kind labour contributions to funding applications. We recommend review of the guidelines about in-kind labour contributions to funding applications.
- We recommend further research into the experiences of First Nations artworkers and artworkers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds in the literary sector, especially with regard to structural racism, burnout and retention.

Organisational and sector development

- **We recommend Writers Australia facilitate opportunities for cooperation and collaboration between literary journals** in a manner that acknowledges the distinct needs of micro-organisations, emerging organisations, journals attached to universities and other groupings.
- We recommend Writers Australia support facilitated mentorships for editors of emerging and micro-organisations.
- We recommend the establishment of a working group on digital preservation of Australian literary journals.
- Facilitation of online workshops for skill-sharing between small and micro-organisations.
- Facilitation of a working group for university-based organisations to build a network and share knowledge and resources relevant to their situations.

Audience Development

- **We recommend targeted investment in digital infrastructure funding for literary journals** to help journals connect with larger audiences in Australia and internationally.
- We recommend the development of up-to-date guidelines for collecting and reporting digital audience data, with an emphasis on widely used open access tools such as Google Analytics, Wordpress, Squarespace and Mailchimp.
- We recommend the development of training materials for small organisations on audience data collection.
- We recommend the development of standard reporting metrics for digital audiences and provision of support to literary journals in ethical and consistent data collection.